

Date: September 14, 2013
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Category: Commissioned Essays

John Fetzer and the Metaphysical Midwest

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Introduction

In 1971, John E. Fetzer published *The Men From Wengen and America's Agony*.¹ Readers perusing this volume expecting a typically dry genealogical treatise were perhaps surprised to find at its end an impassioned essay on the challenges faced by the United States in the wake of the upheavals of the 1960s. They were perhaps even more surprised by Fetzer's detailed prescription for how America might mobilize the spiritual resources necessary to meet these challenges. According to Fetzer, humanity's subconscious mind is an extension of the great Cosmic Mind, symbolized by the great central sun radiating wisdom, goodness, and life energy to every corner of the universe. If we as a species are to advance both technologically and spiritually, Fetzer believed, we must harmonize our conscious mind with the unconscious mind, thus allowing ourselves to become receptive to "the omnipresent flow of Infinite Goodness" and open to "communication . . . with those on the higher planes" of vibratory existence. That this was possible had already been shown by the lives of

¹ John E. Fetzer, *The Men from Wengen and America's Agony: the Wenger-Winger-Wanger History including Christian Wenger, 1718* (Kalamazoo, MI: John E. Fetzer Foundation, 1971); the "America's Agony" section has since been published as a separate book: John E. Fetzer, *America's Agony* (Kalamazoo, MI: The Fetzer Institute, 2007).

specially endowed human beings—the Masters of every age—who have achieved it through meditation, affirmation, and creative visualization. If humanity would learn to control their minds through such practices, then peace of mind and the warmth of never-ending joy would be theirs. Science, too, would be advanced, and the very energies of the cosmos harnessed to provide long-lasting physical health and material wellbeing. And even more importantly, if enough human beings came to realize their essential oneness of the cosmos and brought themselves into rapport with the “Father of Radiation” at the center of it all, then nothing less than a global transformation could be achieved—a new age of spiritual fulfillment, the hallmark of which would be permanent global peace and universal love.²

Unlike the readers of 1971, today’s readers would be far more familiar, and perhaps comfortable, with the kind of worldview Fetzer articulated in *The Men from Wengen*. Undoubtedly they would label it “New Age.” This would not be strictly accurate, however, since in 1971 the general use of the term “New Age” for a coherent movement was still a few years in the future. Those in the know would more correctly identify these ideas as part of a larger spiritual tradition with a much longer history. This tradition stretches back to the Neo-Platonism of the Ancient world, re-emerged during the Renaissance in the guise of Hermeticism, Alchemy, Jewish Kabbalism, and Rosicrucianism, and then was carried forward into the modern period by such movements as Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism, Transcendentalism, Mesmerism,

² Fetzer (2007), 37-41, 47-49, 50-54.

New Thought, Spiritualism, and Theosophy. For want of a better term, this tradition has gone by the name of “metaphysical religion.”³

Metaphysical religions are linked in a family resemblance way by some constellation of the following beliefs: a monistic universe (i.e. matter and spirit are one); the divine presence within; a tight link between humanity (the microcosm) and God and cosmos (the macrocosm); the availability of spiritual energies for healing; the ultimate power of mind over matter; the necessary harmony between religion and science; the unity of all religions; and predictions of an imminent global transformation. Thus Fetzer’s worldview, while distinctive in and of itself, nevertheless built on pre-existing traditions. Part of the task of this chapter, therefore, is to briefly introduce these metaphysical traditions and to suggest how they anticipated many of Fetzer’s fundamental spiritual ideas.

Another question this chapter seeks to answer is how Fetzer came into contact with these ideas, which, given his boyhood in Indiana, might seem unlikely. However, this unlikelihood rests on at least two misconceptions. The first is that, when compared to the overwhelming presence of Christianity in this country, metaphysical beliefs have been marginal.⁴ Recently, Catherine L. Albanese has exploded this myth, demonstrating in her massive *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007) that, over against the two streams of evangelical and liturgical Christianity, metaphysical religion forms a distinct “third way” that has had a tremendous impact on American culture. A

³ Two of the most respected scholarly studies of metaphysical movements in America are J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1967) and Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). For the late usage of the label, “New Age,” see Albanese (2007), 497-98.

⁴ Albanese (2007), 1-18.

second pervasive misconception is that practitioners of metaphysical religion are always to be found on the coasts, especially California, and to look for them in the religiously conservative Midwest—America’s heartland and bastion of mainline Christianity—would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.⁵ And yet, as I show in this chapter, the stereotype of the Midwest’s cultural and religious conservatism is a recent development and decidedly untrue when it comes to metaphysical movements. Indeed, although not widely heralded in religious histories of the region, throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the Midwest was infused with a strong current of metaphysical thought, a current that ran not only through the big cities of the region, but also through the small towns and villages of Fetzer’s natal Indiana. Thus, the second task of this chapter is to sketch (albeit schematically) the history of the “metaphysical Midwest,” a Midwest in which America’s “third way” has been pervasive and readily available to generations of seekers looking for a more holistic way of looking at the universe.

The Beginnings of the Metaphysical Midwest

Freemasons were probably the first to introduce metaphysical ideas into the Midwest, although this remains a matter of conjecture. Freemasonry enjoyed great popularity at the end of the colonial period in America, spreading throughout the thirteen original colonies and then into the hinterland shortly after the Revolutionary War.⁶ For many, Masonic lodges provided a continuity of fellowship and a source of

⁵ Melinda Bollar Wagner, *Metaphysics in Midwestern America* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 3.

⁶ Albanese (2007), 51-52, 124-36; see also Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry in American Culture 1880-1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), especially 3-71; and Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary*

intellectual stimulation lacking on the frontier. It is not surprising, then, that we find lodges popping up in the Northwest Territory, the heart of what would become the Midwest, almost as soon as the earliest settlements were platted. Settlers from New England, Upstate New York, and Kentucky organized the first lodges in Ohio in the 1790s, and from there, Freemasonry quickly spread throughout the region.⁷ Before 1817, for example, Freemasons had organized nine lodges in Indiana, after which date they organized themselves into the Indiana Grand Lodge. Eventually, a Grand Masonic Hall would be erected in Indianapolis in 1851 to house the meetings of the Grand Lodge, and soon, less grand but no less conspicuous Masonic temples could be seen adorning the main streets of most Hoosier towns. By the 1880s, there were some 28,000 Masons in the state. Given Masonic injunctions to secrecy, it is difficult to say whether the majority of these early Masons went beyond a simple Deism in their interpretations of the rich panoply of symbolism they encountered in their lodges. However, it is clear that some recognized its deeper esoteric meanings, and at the very least, Freemasonry promoted an openness to other religious traditions that encouraged seekership and the exploration of the world's spiritual heritage beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition. As one Indiana Mason put it in 1883, the "intelligent Mason...finds in his cosmos the histories of all nations, ages and religions."⁸

Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840 Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁷ Robert Freke Gould, *Gould's History of Freemasonry Throughout the World*, Volume 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 86.

⁸ William Wesley Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, IN: Hammond & Co., 1883), 489-12; Will E. English, "Early Indianapolis Masonry," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* 3 (1905): 5-38.

A little after the arrival of Freemasonry, another tradition that was clearly and openly metaphysical arrived in the Midwest. This was Swedenborgianism, based on the writings of the mystical Swedish seer, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Swedenborg was a trained scientist who specialized initially in mining and metallurgy, but who later sought to master and extend all the known sciences. At age fifty, Swedenborg began to experience a series of religious visions that allowed him to travel in higher worlds where he conversed with spirits of the dead, angels, Jesus, and God himself, symbolized as a great central sun. In the last years of his life, Swedenborg produced a stream of books such as *Secrets of Heaven* (1749) and *Heaven and Hell* (1758) that described his visionary experiences in great detail. Here he related how it was revealed to him that the material and spiritual worlds were simply mirror images of each other, intimately connected and sustained by a continual circulation or ‘influx’ of divine love throughout the cosmos. Further, Swedenborg taught that physical and mental health here on earth was available to all those who sought to live in harmony with God through his divine emanations, and that salvation after death was a continual process in which the spirits of the blessed ascended through the three levels of heaven by making this harmony more perfect.⁹

Swedenborg’s writings caught on especially in the English-speaking world, and the first Swedenborgian Church—known as the Church of the New Jerusalem or simply the New Church—was founded in England in 1787. By this time, Swedenborg’s works were already available in the United States, leading to the founding of the first

⁹ Wilson Van Dusen, *The Presence of Other Worlds: The Findings of Emanuel Swedenborg* (NY: Harper & Row, Publishers (1974); see also Judah (1967), 34-37, 41-42; Albanese (2007), 140-44.

Swedenborgian society in Philadelphia in 1792. This was followed by vigorous proselytization efforts into the interior of the nation. In the Midwest, the most famous Swedenborgian missionary was, of course, John Chapman (1774-1845), who, as “Johnny Appleseed,” scattered Swedenborgian tracts along with his seeds as he traveled the back trails of Ohio and Indiana (Johnny Appleseed’s burial place in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, is now something of a minor tourist attraction). A more substantial, if less colorful contribution to the extension of Swedenborgianism was made by a host of more conventional missionaries, men such as the Rev. George Field, who, from 1838 to 1850, planted congregations in Illinois, Missouri, and Michigan. Indeed, so popular a vogue did the writings of the Swedish seer have in Michigan during the 1840s that there was a serious proposal to name the capital of the new state “Swedenborg.” In Indiana, too, Swedenborgianism had an early presence, again thanks to Rev. Field: both Goshen and La Porte emerged as centers for this tradition in the state, with the La Porte congregation, founded in 1842, now the longest continually operating church in the city.¹⁰

Metaphysical ideas penetrated even farther into the antebellum American consciousness through the writings of the Transcendentalists, especially the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Transcendentalism combined elements from Neoplatonism, German idealism, Swedenborgianism, and Asian religions to create a uniquely American monism in which God is immanent in nature and indwells in

¹⁰ Maguerite Block, *The New Church in the New World* (New York: The Swedenborg Publishing Association, 1984), 112-29; George R. Mathers, *Frontier Faith: The Story of the Pioneer Congregations of Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1820-1860* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: The Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society, 1992), 235-41; Howard Means, *Johnny Appleseed: The Man, the Myth, the American Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

human beings. Emerson explicitly borrowed Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences to argue that every individual can thus know directly the mind of God—called by Emerson the “Over Soul”—through the inspection of nature. It was for this reason that the “Sage of Concord” advocated a self-reliant individualism over against the stale creeds of institutionalized religion and advised his readers to go beyond the facile Christianity of his day and become active seekers.¹¹

Despite the abstruseness of much of Transcendental thought (including Emerson's), the writings and public lectures of Transcendentalists remained extremely popular with the American public until well after the Civil War. Indeed, Emerson's “western tours” on the lyceum circuit were widely reported by Midwest newspapers, occasionally accompanied by complete stenographic transcriptions of his talks. Apparently Emerson made little effort to “dumb down” his lectures. Hence the *Indianapolis Daily Gazette* observed in a February 1866 edition that, “it is not everybody that can appreciate Mr. Emerson—even those who are in the habit of attending popular lectures.” Nevertheless, the newssheet hailed him as “beyond all question the most original and profound thinker in America,” and urged the “intelligent and intellectual of our community” to “turn out this evening, and give him a good audience.” Evidently, many in the Midwest had a taste for Transcendentalist thought, for they brought the sage back to the region annually for nearly two decades.¹²

¹¹ Judah (1967), 24, 31-34; Albanese (2007), 160-76.

¹² Ernest Marchand, “Emerson and the Frontier,” *American Literature* 3:2 (May 1931): 149-74; Russell B. Nye, “Emerson in Michigan and the Northeast,” *Michigan Historical Magazine* 26 (Spring 1942): 159-72; Frederick E. Shortmeier, “Indianapolis Newspaper Accounts of Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 49:3 (September 1953): 307-12.

Beyond simply its expression in the philosophical works of Swedenborg and Emerson, and its use in the symbols and rituals of Freemasonry, the metaphysical worldview was employed in the antebellum United States in more pragmatic ways, for example, in the form of magnetic healing commonly known as Mesmerism. In the 18th century, the ancient concept of Vitalism (that is, life is due to some special subtle energy in nature) gained renewed prominence after the recognition of such natural forces as gravity and electricity. The Viennese physician, Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), theorized that the universe was permeated with a vital force or energy he called “animal magnetism.” Mesmer maintained that this force could be manipulated by specially endowed human beings who could channel it into the human body to cure both physical and mental disease. Despite the fact that a French royal commission headed by none other than Benjamin Franklin determined that “animal magnetism” did not exist, the popular demand for mesmeric healing exploded. Mesmeric healing was brought to the United States by the Frenchman Charles Poyen in 1836, and from then on, legions of mesmerists or magnetic healers fanned out across the nation promising to cure everything from insanity to consumption to broken bones for a nominal fee.¹³

The antebellum Midwest proved extremely attractive to magnetic healers. Itinerants plied the back roads, bringing relief to suffering pioneers in isolated cabins and hamlets, while in the larger cities of the region such as Cincinnati, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Chicago, newspapers routinely carried the advertisements for the

¹³ Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); see also Judah (1967), 48-49, 51-52; Albanese (2007), 190-206.

practices of “doctors of magnetism.” Cincinnati, especially, became something of a headquarters for alternative medicine in the region, and in addition to magnetic healers, the Queen City attracted Thomsonian herbalists, homeopaths, hydropathists, phrenologists, and those who combined them all into something called simply “Eclectic Medicine.”¹⁴ One of the more notable eclectics to emerge from this milieu was the philosopher-physician Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814-1899). Buchanan pioneered what he called Therapeutic Sarcognomy, which depended for cures on the close connection of soul, mind, and body and the manipulation of energies both empirical (e.g. electricity) and non-empirical (“nervaura,” Buchanan’s version of animal magnetism). Although rejected by most orthodox physicians, Buchanan’s early form of “energy medicine” was widely discussed by the general public in the region and even hailed by the faculty of Indiana University as “a revolution in philosophy.”¹⁵

As mesmerism developed in the United States, new interpretations of its method of action emerged, most influentially in the work of Phineas Quimby (1802-1866), a sometime clockmaker from Portland, Maine, who was uniquely adept at putting others in a mesmeric trance. Based on his experiences with mesmeric healings, Quimby developed a rigorously psychosomatic theory of disease, in which all disease was due to mental error (i.e. simply believing one was sick made a person sick). The actual mechanism for disease, according to Quimby, was that mental error

¹⁴ John S. Haller, Jr. *Medical Protestants: The Eclectics in American Medicine 1825-1939* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Hugh M. Ayer, “Joseph Rodes Buchanan and ‘The Science of Man,’” *The Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 36:1 (January 1962): 32-40.

blocked the influx from God. Only when an erroneous idea was removed would it flow again, restoring health. Quimby had numerous students who, after his death in 1866, extended his teachings in variety of different directions. One stream resulted in what came to be called “New Thought” in the 1890s. In New Thought, the basic idea of mental healing was simplified into the notion of the “power of positive thinking.” According to the “Positive Thinkers,” one doesn’t need healers to be rid of incorrect thinking since one could do it oneself through the use of affirmations (repeated positive statements) and creative visualizations.¹⁶

Yet another interpretation of mesmeric healing emerged from another of Quimby’s students, Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), founder of Christian Science. Eddy went even farther than Quimby and the followers of New Thought. Claiming that she had received special insights into the nature of God and the cosmos, Eddy, asserted that “God is all in all,” that is, He is everything that exists including human beings. God, however, is pure spirit—as are we all. The physical world, therefore, does not exist. According to Eddy, we only think it exists due to the erroneous thinking of the human “mortal mind.” Once, however, we transcend our “mortal mind” in favor of the “divine mind,” human beings will cease to hold the mistaken belief in the material world, and we will realize that pain, sickness, and death do not exist. Mrs. Eddy expounded on these ideas in *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures*, first published in 1875, after which she founded the Massachusetts Metaphysical College in 1881 and then the Church of Christ (Scientist) in 1892.¹⁷

¹⁶ Judah (1967), 146-68, 169-93; Albanese (2007), 285-89, 300-29, 394-99, 413-48.

¹⁷ Judah (1967), 256-89; Albanese (2007), 283-300.

Just as many Midwesterners were receptive to mesmeric and other forms of “energy” healing, so, too, were many receptive to New Thought and Christian Science. During the 1880s, graduates of the Massachusetts Metaphysical College established Christian Science training facilities in Milwaukee, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Kansas City, and until 1920, the largest number of Christian Science congregations were located in the Midwest. Chicago emerged as an important center of Christian Science, producing such nationally known Christian Science lecturers as Edward Kimball (1845-1909), sometimes called the St. Paul of the movement.

In 1889, when Mrs. Eddy radically reorganized and centralized Christian Science, many of her disgruntled followers broke away to join the growing, albeit amorphous, New Thought movement, which found much of its strength in the Midwest. New Thought, while championing the idea of the power of the mind just as vigorously as Christian Science, nevertheless was generally more tolerant of non-Christian influences and less doctrinaire when it came to claims about the unreality of matter. Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849-1925), for example, through her Chicago-based publication, *The Christian Metaphysician*, taught a version of Christian Science blended with elements of western esotericism and eastern religions, which she called “Mental Science.” This in turn inspired two of her students, Charles Fillmore (1854-1948) and Myrtle Fillmore (1845-1931), to found one of the most successful New Thought organizations, the Unity School of Christianity, in Kansas City, Missouri.¹⁸ Other influential New Thought spokesmen to come out of the Midwest were the

¹⁸ Paul Ivey, “Christian Science and New Thought,” in Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, Andrew Clayton (eds.), *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 737-38.

Illinois-born Ralph Waldo Trine (1866-1958), whose 1897 *In Tune with the Infinite* remains to this day one of the most widely read New Thought books; and, of course, Ohio-born Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), whose *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), selling well over 15 million copies, brought New Thought to the masses.¹⁹ As the birthplaces of Trine and Peale suggest, by the end of the 19th century, the Midwest was not only receptive to metaphysical movements, but was now producing national leaders of these movements.

Spiritualism and Theosophy in the Midwest

While elements of the metaphysical worldview were introduced to the Midwest through the efforts of Freemasons, Swedenborgians, Transcendentalists, Mesmerists, Christian Scientists, and New Thought practitioners, it gained its widest and most potent diffusion in the region after the rise of two related movements: Spiritualism and Theosophy. The Spiritualist movement traces its origins back to the Fox sisters, who in 1848 began to experience communications with the spirits of the dead while living outside of Rochester, New York. Highly publicized in the press of the day, Spiritualism spread both east and west, and the séance, a ritual in which spirits spoke to the living through a medium, became commonplace. It should be emphasized, however, that Spiritualism was a bona fide religious movement, which, while always loose in its organization, nevertheless largely coalesced around the theological writings of the “Seer of Poughkeepsie,” Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910).

¹⁹ Albanese (2007), 394-95, 442-47.

Davis began his career as a mesmeric healer, but soon found that while in a mesmeric trance, he could travel in the spirit world and meet with many of the great spiritual masters of previous generations, most important of whom were the Roman physician, Galen, and the Swedish seer, Emanuel Swedenborg. Through dozens of books such as *The Principles of Nature* (1847), Davis articulated a complicated system he referred to as Harmonialism. Harmonialism stressed a number of Swedenborgian ideas, such as the divine central sun which emits a constant flow of spiritual energy throughout the concentric spheres of the cosmos; the microcosmic nature of mind, body, and soul; and the possibility of continual spiritual perfection after death. Unlike Swedenborg, however, Davis rejected such Judeo-Christian emphases as the final judgment and the reality of hell, the need for Christ as savior, and the notion of an anthropomorphic God. Moreover, while stressing the availability of spirit revelation to all, Davis also emphasized the compatibility of his system of Spiritualism with science; after all, this was the era in which invisible natural forces were being harnessed for communication, for example, the electric telegraph, an instrument every bit as mysterious to the general public of the day as was the Spiritualist séance.²⁰

Spiritualism spread rapidly not only in the Northeast, but also especially in the Midwest during the decade of the 1850s. In the wake of several tours by the Fox Sisters to the region, innumerable Spiritualist “circles” sprang up and many a “home

²⁰ The two best scholarly studies of American Spiritualism are Brett E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd Edition (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001). See also Judah (1967), 50-91 and Albanese (2007), 177-53, 257-70.

grown” medium discovered his or her psychic ability to contact the dead and heal the living. Spiritualism was strongest in the growing cities of the region, where Spiritualist circles coalesced into incorporated Spiritualist organizations—frequently called “harmonial societies”—and then into state conventions. Spiritualism, too, had its representatives in the rural districts of many Midwest states, and here, borrowing from the revivalist tradition of Evangelical Christianity, Spiritualists sought to build community through the convocation of impromptu “camp meetings.” In time, many of these Spiritualist camp grounds became institutionalized, with regular meeting times, boards of trustees, and eventually elaborate infrastructure, including Spiritualist halls and permanent housing.

Although, as in the rest of the country, much of the popular interest in Midwestern Spiritualism stemmed from the sensationalism of spirit manifestations and the like, among committed Spiritualists there was always an intellectual eagerness to explore the complexities of the metaphysical worldview behind the manifestations. Andrew Jackson Davis, the acknowledged “theologian” of American Spiritualism, was a frequent guest both at state and local Spiritualist conventions, and traveled the same lyceum circuit that welcomed such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson. What’s more, throughout the rest of the 19th century, the Midwest became a center for the publication of Spiritualist books, journals, and newspapers. According to one student of 19th-century Spiritualism, no fewer than seventy-five Spiritualist publications were issued from the Midwest, with Ohio alone accounting for a third of these. Most were short lived and relatively crude, but some, such as the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, published in Chicago from 1865 to 1895 (after which it moved

to California), achieved international distinction as a sophisticated interpreter of the metaphysical worldview.²¹

Indiana was not immune to the lure of Spiritualism, and in time it would become one of the most active centers of the new religious movement in the Midwest. Spiritualist circles had appeared as early as 1850, with the first Spiritualist churches built by Quaker converts in the southeast portion of the state. By 1862, enough Spiritualist churches existed to warrant the creation of a state organization of Indiana Spiritualists, which proudly sent its first body of delegates to the National Spiritualist convention in Chicago in 1873.²²

As mentioned above, Spiritualists adopted the practice of camp meeting as a means to associate with like-minded people and to proselytize the curious. Indiana Spiritualists were no different. Inspired by an 1883 visit to an exceptionally successful and long-lived Spiritualist camp in Vicksburg, Michigan, several Spiritualists from the Indianapolis area banded together to organize what would become the Chesterfield Spiritualist Camp, located on a thirty-four acre site on the banks of the White River. The first camp meeting, which occurred in 1888, was an ad hoc affair, more picnic than camp. However, by 1891, an inn and a dining hall were now available for the comfort of visitors, tent cabins erected for staff, and a little later,

²¹ Ann Braude, "News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 99 (1999): 399-63.

²² Anna Stockinger, "The History of Spiritualism in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 20 (March/December 1924): 280-87; Louis Martin Sears, "Robert Dale Owen as a Mystic," *Indiana Magazine of History* 24:1 (March 1928): 15-25.

a large canvas auditorium was constructed to host the displays of the “physical” mediums for which the Camp became famous.²³

While physical demonstrations always remained popular, the philosophical side of Spiritualism was not neglected at the Camp. A lyceum was organized which featured speakers who expounded on the works of Andrew Jackson Davis and other Spiritualist thinkers, as well as mediums who described in florid Victorian detail their time among the spirits. By 1900, Camp Chesterfield was firmly institutionalized, with activities now extending beyond the summer season. Frequent visitors now constructed permanent cottages with gas and electricity, and the grounds were serviced on a regular basis by interurban trolleys from Indianapolis. Given its longevity—it remains active to this day—Camp Chesterfield by the 1920s had become the most important Spiritualist camp in the Midwest, rivaled only by New York’s Camp Lily Dale in national prominence.²⁴

Spiritualism today no longer enjoys the popularity it once did, but it remains important in the history of metaphysical movements in the United States if only because of the spin-off traditions that it spawned. One of these was Theosophy. In 1874, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), a practicing medium newly arrived from Russia, met Colonel Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907) while both were investigating spirit manifestations in Vermont. The pair soon found that, beyond Spiritualism, they shared an interest in the esoteric teachings of the religions of the

²³ “Physical” mediums are those who seek to prove the reality of the spirit world through physical precipitations of spiritual objects or physical manifestations by spirits.

²⁴ Stockinger (1924), 282-83; Judah (1967), 80-81; *Chesterfield Lives 1886-1986* (Chesterfield, IN: Camp Chesterfield, 1986).

world. The following year they founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in order to pursue the unification of all religions through a recovery of ancient wisdom from East and West. In 1879, Blavatsky and Olcott would relocate the headquarters of the Theosophical Society to Adyar, India, in order to more adequately study the ancient texts of Hinduism and Buddhism. In time, this eventuated in Blavatsky's magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Here, Blavatsky synthesized western harmonialism with eastern monism to create a grand cosmological scheme in which the human race was destined to evolve to higher levels of consciousness under the guidance of a shadowy band of superhuman beings known collectively as the adepts or ascended Masters. *The Secret Doctrine* remains today a spiritual classic and the touchstone for many metaphysical groups both inside and outside the Theosophical tradition.²⁵

Despite Blavatsky's and Olcott's early removal to India, Theosophy had already become firmly established in the United States, with Theosophical lodges being founded across the nation in the decade that followed. Perhaps in part because of the excitement over Asian religions generated by the World's Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Theosophy found a home in the Midwest—indeed, the US headquarters for the Theosophical Society would eventually be located in Wheaton, Illinois.²⁶ In addition to formal lodges, informal associations of theosophists popped up throughout the

²⁵ Judah (1967), 92-119; Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1973), 74-78, 98-102; Albanese (2007), 270-83, 334-44.

²⁶ Ellwood (1973), 99; for more on the Parliament, see Eric J. Ziolkowski (ed.), *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

region, especially where Spiritualist groups already existed. In Ft. Wayne, for example, the Spiritualist Occult Science Society was joined in the 1890s by a chapter of the Theosophical Society, and apparently the two groups shared many members. One such member was a local homeopathic physician and some-time Campbellite minister named Levi H. Dowling (1844-1911). Dowling soon discovered that he had psychic abilities through which the Theosophical Masters announced the dawning of the Age of Aquarius by dictating to him the text of what would become *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus* (1909). Reportedly taken verbatim from the indelible Akashic Records, *The Aquarian Gospel* relates in great detail the lost years of Jesus between his boyhood and the beginning of his ministry, during which time he traveled to Egypt, Persia, India, and Tibet where he studied the great texts of the world's religions while teaching his own brand of religious universalism.²⁷

Eventually published in California and London, Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel* would soon become a book much beloved by metaphysical groups throughout the nation. It served as inspiration for such neo-theosophical texts as the *St. Germain Discourses* promoted by Guy and Edna Ballard, whose "I AM" Religious Activity, headquartered in Chicago, enjoyed phenomenal growth in the 1930s; and the works of Baird T. Spalding, whose *Life and Teachings of the Masters of the Far East*, published in several volumes from the 1920s to the '50s, would greatly extend the mythology of Jesus in Asia. All three sets of texts would become instrumental in New Age

²⁷ Levi Dowling, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (Los Angeles, CA: Leo. W. Dowling, 1908); for a complete biography of Dowling, see John Benedict Buescher, *Aquarian Evangelist: The Age of Aquarius as It Dawned in the Mind of Levi Dowling* (Fullerton, CA: Theosophical History, 2008).

understandings of Jesus in the 1970s and '80s, by which time the “dawning of the Age of Aquarius” had become an accepted theme in American pop culture.²⁸

So popular did Theosophy—or at least theosophical themes—become in the Midwest that it came to challenge the older Andrew-Jackson-Davis-inspired Spiritualism as the most popular metaphysical system in the region. Even in strongholds such as Indiana’s Camp Chesterfield, theosophical ideas had become so prevalent by the 1910s and 1920s, that long-time camp secretary, Mabel Riffle, attempted unsuccessfully to ban the discussion of such ideas as the ascended Masters, spiritual evolution, and especially, reincarnation. By this time, however, besides the various branches of the Theosophical Society itself, several correspondence schools, such as the College of Universal Truth in Chicago and the College of Divine Metaphysics in Indianapolis, were offering courses in theosophical subjects to those who wished to go beyond Spiritualism.²⁹ What’s more, Theosophy seems to have had an impact on some unlikely religious groups in the region. Parts of Dowling’s *Aquarian Gospel*, for example, were incorporated into the *Holy Koran* of the Noble Drew Ali, a text which became a mainstay of the Chicago-based Moorish Science Temple and later the Nation of Islam.³⁰

Perhaps even more striking, theosophical ideas seem to have held fascination for some in the millennialist tradition of Seventh-day Adventism, headquartered in Battle Creek, Michigan. There the Adventists maintained one of the largest health

²⁸ Baird T. Spalding, *Life and Teachings of the Masters of the East* (6 volumes) (Marina Del Rey, CA: DeVorss and Co., 1924-1996); Ellwood (1973), 121-25; Albanese (2007), 467-71, 497.

²⁹ Judah (1967), 81, 136.

³⁰ Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 58-69.

resorts in the United States, the Battle Creek Sanitarium, which for over fifty years was superintended by the flamboyant Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943). Although never himself a Theosophist, Dr. Kellogg was nevertheless theologically independent, and this independence seems to have rubbed off on some of his employees and associates.³¹ One such was Jacob Beilhart (1867-1908), an erstwhile Seventh-day Adventist who was fired from the Sanitarium for unauthorized faith healing, after which he became a mental healer in the New Thought tradition. In time, however, Bielhart gravitated to theosophical ideas, which he then blended with Christian themes to create the communal Spirit Fruit Society. Never a large organization, Bielhart's Spirit Fruit Society nevertheless maintained communes in Ohio, Illinois, and eventually California, where it lasted until the 1960s.³²

An even more spectacular and influential metaphysical movement with links to Dr. Kellogg was nurtured by Indiana-born William S. Sadler (1875-1969). Sadler began his career working as a bellhop at the Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1889, but by 1894 he had worked himself into the trusted position as supervisor of one of Dr. Kellogg's medical missions in Chicago. Three years later, Sadler married Dr. Kellogg's niece, Lena Kellogg, and after the couple attended medical school, they remained in Chicago where they established a successful joint practice. Sometime after 1906, Dr. Sadler was called in to observe a neighbor who was given to talking at length in his sleep. The content of the "sleeping subject's" utterances suggested to Sadler and

³¹ For more on Dr. Kellogg's theological development, see my *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the Religion of Biologic Living* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, forthcoming).

³² H. Roger Grant, *Spirit Fruit: A Gentle Utopia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988); James L. Murphy, *Reluctant Radicals: Jacob L. Bielhart and the Spirit Fruit Society* (Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1989).

others that the man, later identified as another Kellogg relative, Wilfred Kellogg, was actually channeling a series of higher beings from other planets. Over the following decades, Sadler hosted a forum in his home to discuss the insights revealed by Kellogg, now gathered together as the Urantia Papers (Urantia being a name for Earth).

While much in the Urantia Papers is unique, some of it strongly echoes both Seventh-day Adventism and Theosophy. For instance, in addition to the traditional Adventist rejection of hell and post-mortem consciousness, the Urantia Papers continue the Adventist fascination with intelligent life on other planets. However, the fact that these aliens function as “ascended Masters” and have made contact in order to guide the evolution of human beings in order to facilitate their infinite progression through a vast and intricate harmonial cosmos strongly suggests a Theosophical influence. The Urantia Papers even includes a channeled life of Jesus, and while this life does not have Jesus traveling to Asia, it does relate that he studied eastern religions in Alexandria, a record of which purportedly still survives in India. Finally published in 1955 as the *Urantia Book*, the 2,097-page “fifth epochal revelation” set the stage for subsequent channeled works, most notably *A Course in Miracles* (1976). Moreover, the *Urantia Book*—channeled as it was from space aliens—fit well with the growing interest in unidentified flying objects that spread across the country in the 1950s.³³

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³³ Martin Gardner, *Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press, 1995).

With the mention of the *Urantia Book* and UFOs—both of which fascinated John Fetzer³⁴—it is apposite to conclude this chapter by asking how his story fits into the larger story of the metaphysical Midwest that I have been narrating. By the time Fetzer was born in Decatur, Indiana, in 1901, the region had played host to a variety of metaphysical movements for nearly a century. Many of the concepts that would inform Fetzer’s later worldview in *America’s Agony* were already circulating through the culture. For example, Fetzer’s conviction that the subconscious mind was a gateway to the great Cosmic Mind echoed similar emphases in the New Thought movement, and his belief in the power of affirmations and creative visualization probably came from the same source. Spiritualism accounts for Fetzer’s belief in the possibility of communication with those on the higher planes of existence, while his notion of energy healing quite possibly had its roots in Mesmerism and magnetic healing. Meanwhile, Theosophy and its offshoots provided Fetzer with the hope that ascended Masters were guiding human spiritual evolution towards global transformation. Even Fetzer’s great central sun—the “Father of Radiation”—can be traced back through H. P. Blavatsky and A. J. Davis to its source in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Many more such influences could be adduced—not least of all, the fundamental metaphysical idea of man as microcosm—but space limitations preclude me from tracing them all. What is important to the argument of this chapter, however, is that even though Fetzer creatively repurposed metaphysical ideas to fit

³⁴ Carol Hegedus, *John Earl Fetzer: Stories of One Man’s Search* (Kalamazoo, MI: The Fetzer Institute, 2004), 181-87; Tom Beaver, “In Search of Context for John Fetzer’s Spiritual Journey” (November 30, 2011), 7.

his own evolving understanding of the cosmos, it is clear that the seeds of his later thinking were already present in the turn-of-the-century Midwest of his youth.

Although it is impossible at this remove to say with any certainty how early the Midwest's metaphysical culture influenced young John, he undoubtedly would have gained some awareness of the worldview simply by reading local newspapers and magazines, or by talking with relatives and neighbors. When Fetzer was a teenager, he followed his mother into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which, as we have seen, had some within its ranks who proved highly susceptible to metaphysical ideas. It is possible that John was first exposed to extended discussions of these ideas while a student from 1922 to 1926 at the Seventh-day Adventists' Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University).³⁵ We do know with reasonable certainty, however, that Fetzer was inspired to explore the metaphysical worldview through his experience with radio and the works of the visionary inventor, Nikola Tesla, which he read in the late 1920s.³⁶ We also know that one of the places he turned to for more information in this direction was none other than the Indiana Spiritualist Camp Chesterfield, which he visited perhaps as early as 1933. Here, Fetzer not only became interested in the phenomena of the séance and the Ouija board, but he was also inspired to study the intellectual underpinnings of these phenomena. Fetzer, by his own admission, was a frequent patron of the Camp Chesterfield bookstore where he avidly bought books "by the armload" on Spiritualism,

³⁵ Hegedus (2004), 43-44, 121-24, 133; Tom Beaver, "In Search of Context for John Fetzer's Spiritual Journey" (November 30, 2011), 5-6, 8.

³⁶ Hegedus (2004), 42-43; Tom Beaver, "In Search of Context for John Fetzer's Spiritual Journey" (November 30, 2011), 6.

Theosophy, New Thought, and psychic phenomena.³⁷ A glance at that part of his personal library still extant shows a number of classics from these traditions, for example, the Spiritualist works of Arthur Findlay, Theosophical works by H. P. Blavatsky, Alice Bailey, and Guy Ballard, and the psychic revelations of Edgar Cayce.³⁸ In the same year that he attended Camp Chesterfield, Fetzer also joined the Freemasons, and over the years, through works such as Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (1928), he came to learn about the Rosicrucian roots of masonic symbolism and the hermetic worldview encoded in them.³⁹ Undoubtedly, Fetzer's visits to Camp Chesterfield and membership in the Masons were of seminal importance to his later spiritual development.

Once set on the metaphysical path in the 1930s, Fetzer became an intrepid explorer, studying topics including reincarnation, past lives, astral projection, astrology, pyramid power, dream work, meditation, and UFOs. Thus, when over the course of his long life new metaphysical works appeared on the scene—works such as the five volumes of Baird Spalding's *Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East* (1924-1955), *The Urantia Book* (1955), the Seth Material of Jane Roberts (1970-1984), or *A Course in Miracles* (1976)—John Fetzer had the philosophical understanding and spiritual openness to appreciate and assimilate these new works into his developing worldview. The same can be said of the metaphysical ideas of such

³⁷ Hegedus (2004), 127-29, 143; Tom Beaver, "In Search of Context for John Fetzer's Spiritual Journey" (November 30, 2011), 6.

³⁸ "John E. Fetzer's Personal Books" (November 5, 2013).

³⁹ Hegedus (2004), 134-37.

eastern traditions as Transcendental Meditation and Surat Shabd Yoga, both of which became part of his spiritual thinking.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, Fetzer had the misfortune of coming to spiritual maturity in the late 1940s and 1950s, a period of heightened pressure for cultural and religious conformity during the beginnings of the Cold War. This pressure to conform was particularly powerful in the Midwest, which, beginning in the 1920s had already come to be seen as the “heartland,” the bedrock of conservative American political and cultural values.⁴¹ As a businessman whose business—broadcasting—depended on the goodwill not only of the government to supply the necessary licenses, but of local business elites to buy his commercial airtime, Fetzer wisely kept his spiritual views private, a habit he maintained until the last decades of his life. By this time, the emerging “New Age” movement signaled a renewed willingness on the part of a large number of Americans to entertain metaphysical ideas openly again, even in the Midwest.⁴²

Given the conservatisms of the time and place in which he lived his adult life, John E. Fetzer showed considerable independence in charting the spiritual course that he did, and by incorporating it into the mission of the Fetzer Institute. And yet, as I hope this chapter has demonstrated, Fetzer’s worldview was nevertheless a product of his region, for just as metaphysical movements have had a tremendous

⁴⁰ Hegedus (2004), 137-54, 156-88; Tom Beaver, “In Search of Context for John Fetzer’s Spiritual Journey” (November 30, 2011), 5-8.

⁴¹ James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 39-66.

⁴² By 1977, there was “a larger psychic/metaphysical/mystical community functioning in Chicago than in either Los Angeles or San Francisco” (Gordon Melton quoted in Wagner [1983], 15); Hegedus (2004), 181-82.

impact on American culture at large, so, too, they played a significant—if now overlooked—role in the religious history of the Midwest. Indeed, once the recent stereotypes about the region are cleared away, what we find is that, far from being an anomaly, John Fetzer’s metaphysical quest turns out not only to be a quintessentially American quest, but a decidedly Midwestern one as well.